

Considering Proverbs

June 7, 2020

Greetings, those of you in our Adult Bible Study at First Presbyterian Church, Wilkes-Barre! Cindy and I heard from several of you an interest in continuing our Bible Study into the summer, at least until we can meet again in person. So, here's the first of that! Our problem is that the books are yet to come in. At the moment I have just one copy. But, at least I have that! I had expected to have them in by the time I'd be mailing this.

Our theme for the quarter is "Many Faces of Wisdom". We are starting with the book of Proverbs. The word "wisdom" itself can have somewhat different meanings, depending on culture and context. The Hebrew word for wisdom, "hokhmah" has a meaning of "firm" or "fixed", that is, what is solid and true. The earliest meaning in the Hebrew writings is something like "practical" wisdom. For example, the wisdom attributed to the artisans who made the tabernacle and its fittings and accessories in Exodus. Animals, even ants, are considered to have a practical wisdom in their own way. This reflects that Hebrew is a very practical, empirical language. In Hebrew literature, and what came to be their wisdom literature, this kind of practical wisdom is seen as coming from God. In such a manner, when God made the animals, he gave them the practical wisdom needed to cope and live. Where Hebrew wisdom writings most differed from that of the pagans is an emphasis on wickedness versus righteousness, and the fear of God.

Later, the term wisdom came to apply almost exclusively to the well-ordered religious life. You could call wisdom "moral and religious intelligence." It was laced with ethical content. Eventually wisdom came to be almost equated with "The Law".

The Hebrew perspective, especially early, on wisdom as a practical matter, contrasts greatly with Greek ideas, which were often more philosophical than practical. As Greek culture and ideas spread, even before Alexander the Great, they also affected the Jewish perspective. The personification of wisdom is often encountered in the Book of Proverbs, just as the Greeks used the name "Sophia," their word, and all but worshipped "Wisdom" as a goddess. All of these ideas affected the early Church greatly.

As scripture, The law was the first writings to be considered canonical, or "Sacred", sometime during the exile. Possibly somewhat earlier, as we read about the seriousness and effect of the Book Deuteronomy in Josiah's time. By the time Ezra reaches Jerusalem, "The Law", the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, are canon. They are not to be changed; they are God's word. On the other hand, books written by or about

various prophets are still evolving. By the time of Jesus, The Prophets are a collection of books that are considered sacred, and canonical, as well. They are Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and the various books bearing the names of prophets. They brought a separate and distinctly Hebrew perspective on religion, something missing in other contemporary religions. The prophets spoke for God, especially to the King or other authorities. By the time of Jesus, the full body of scripture was “The Law and the Prophets.”

But, by the time of Jesus, in addition to The Law and the Prophets, there also existed additional “Writings.” These were not quite put in the category of scripture yet, but were a part of religious thought and discourse, and not taken lightly. A good modern analogy would be our hymnbook. It is full of sacred meaning. But, it is not immutable. It is not quite the authoritative “The Voice of God.” People can and do change hymns. They can be manipulated to serve whatever current fads and trends are, and individual hymns can be moved in and out of the hymnbook. There are lots of different versions. The Hebrew writings remained somewhat less than canonical for a while. The Greek translation of the Old Testament (Jewish Bible), the “Septuagint” (abbreviated LXX) contained a rather full collection of these writings. But in 90 A.D. at the Council of Jamnia, Jewish authorities met and decided that certain of these writings would be considered “canonical”, and part of the Hebrew Bible, and others would not. Meanwhile, the Christian Church, by now majority gentile and Greek speaking, had adopted the LXX as their Bible, eventually “Old Testament,” to go with an accumulating number of their own writings, what would become the “New Testament.” This discrepancy between the Jewish Bible and the Catholic “Old Testament” continues to this day. The additional books in the Catholic Old testament are now, collectively, called “The Apocrypha”. When Luther translated the Bible into German, and other protestants translated it into English, those books were left out.

Considering just those books ultimately included in the Hebrew Bible, let’s look at the topics covered. The Psalms is the Jewish Hymnbook. That’s literally what “Psalms” means. (That doesn’t mean that Jews can’t sing other hymns; they do.) There are also some books that are included because they are to be read at festivals. That’s where Song of Solomon, lamentations, and Esther come in. Ruth is there because it speaks to David’s heritage, but is also read at a festival. Ecclesiastes is also a festival reading. Job and Proverbs are grouped with Psalms in the Hebrew Bible as “Poetic Books”. The last three, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah (one book in the Jewish canon) and Chronicles, might be considered “history” although Daniel also has elements of prophesy and escatology (about the end times).

Of this collection, “The Writings”, several books are what we would call “Wisdom Literature”: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. And, of course, it is Hebrew wisdom literature. In a sense, it is the latest thread of the Hebrew scriptures to mature. The Law starts at Sinai with the ten Commandments. These are God’s Law to address human behavior toward God and towards each other. There were prophets from the very beginning who saw and understood what God was doing and spoke to that. The first named prophet is Miriam. Even before Sinai, she sees what has happened at the red Sea and proclaimed that it is God’s doing, He has saved his people. Later prophets speak God’s word to the people, and then to the kings. Typically kings did not want to hear it. Kings do not typically like the notion that Law applies to them too, and neither do the wealthy and other powers in society.

What the law says, and what the Prophets said to the kings and people was important. But how do you apply that to ordinary daily problems of ordinary every-day people? This is where wisdom literature comes in. The law and the prophets typically addressed the big problems. Do not Kill, for example. But, do I need to always help when my neighbor asks for a favor? What if my ox falls into a ditch on the sabbath? There are always practical situations that are outside of the direct scope of Law and prophetic messages. Retail level issues. That’s what wisdom, and wisdom literature, is for. A wise person figures out the appropriate thing to do. Wisdom literature gives good advice. Hebrew wisdom literature sees that wisdom as coming from God. Eventually the Law was expanded to include more and more minutia. Instead of wisdom, an exhaustive accumulation of rules were seen as the proper way to know how to live. It is against such a rigid understanding of Law that Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount.

Wisdom literature comes in many forms, but the most often seen is the “proverb”, a saying that speaks some useful truth about life. There are other forms: riddles, fables or parables, and prose (as in Ecclesiastes). Many of these are embedded in other parts of scripture, such as the parable in Judges 9: 7-21. But we are going to focus on proverbs right now.

The Book of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon. Like many other books, there are parts that are clearly written much later than the time of the attributed author. Yet, it is quite likely that much of Proverbs may indeed go back to Solomon’s time, or even earlier. It would seem that Solomon, perhaps more so than being wise himself, collected wisdom, including wisdom literature of neighboring countries. (Indeed, some of Solomon’s actions, such as his overabundance of wives, allowing heathen temples, and heavy taxation, do not suggest wisdom.) Many sections of Proverbs, and quite a few individual proverbs, have parallels, or can be traced to or from, wisdom literature of Canaan (and Phoenicia), Babylon, or Egypt. This isn’t surprising; good proverbs or

“sayings” (as “Proverbs” means), have a universal quality. But even in these cases, the proverbs that have parallels to other sources are cast in a Hebrew perspective that sees God as the central authority.

Proverbs Chapter 1 seems to be relatively later than much of the rest of the book, and is something of an introduction. The original purposes of the book, as edited into its current form, seems to have been as a book of instruction for young Jewish men, as they grew toward adulthood. A Proverb, “Mashal” in Hebrew, means “a saying”. There’s a sense in which it means, “to be like”, or in English, a simile. There are particular proverbs of that form, for example 10:26: “Like vinegar to the teeth, and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him.” But there are many other forms.

Our scripture reading is proverbs Chapter 1. The lesson book only includes selected verses. It can’t hurt you to read them all. Verses 1-6 is prologue; it tells you what the book is for: Verse 2: “For learning about wisdom and instruction. For understanding words of insight,” Verse 7 is the “Motto” of the whole book:

7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

The rest of the chapter, starting in Verse 8, begins with “Hear, my son, your father’s instructions.... This very personal caring, of the father, giving advice to his son, pervades the rest of the chapter. Verse 10, “My child, if sinners entice you....” This loving, caring father to son tone is direct and speaks directly to the duty of a father to his children, to give them not just food and support but to pass on a practical, working wisdom about how to get along in the world. It is the kind of teaching that just can’t happen in a classroom of thirty undisciplined children supervised by an overworked schoolteacher. It needs a mother or a father.

In verse 20, we see a section in which Wisdom is personified. She cries out to those who would not listen. Does that not sound very much like the prophets? Sometime read the beginning of Isaiah, Chapter 6, God’s call to the prophet Isaiah. Keep reading, where God gives him a message, but people will not listen. So it is also with wisdom. The prophets might call out for people to turn away from idols and back to God, and to do justice and walk humbly. Similarly the Wisdom of Proverbs calls on those who would listen to use good judgment in all things, judgment that comes from God, which is there freely available for guidance. So, in a sense, the messages are quite similar.

In reading this, it comes to mind how much our current culture seems to reject Wisdom. Think about our current popular proverbs. Yes, there are those old stand-bys,

like “A penny saved is a penny earned.” Or “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.” You can probably think of some. But the ones you hear the most now are the advertising slogans. “No limits!”, or “Go for the Gusto!” One of the modern proverbs of our culture that I hate most is, “Toot your own horn; nobody else is going to toot it!” Do you remember, “Better red than dead?” or, “Give peace a chance!” as a philosophy for dealing with totalitarian states?

Really, verse 7’s “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” seems to have been forgotten in our society. Individual self-interest is celebrated and elevated as the ultimate value. “Trash talking” is celebrated in sports and in the media. One-upmanship is looked on as clever and to be applauded.

I’d like to mention one final caution concerning the book of Proverbs. It shows a Deuteronomic perspective. The reason for following the wisdom advice given, just as the reason for obeying God’s Law in Deuteronomy, is so that things will go well for you. There is much truth in that. People who follow these wise principles are more likely going to prosper, make friends, be productive, and be respected. They will generally have a better life. And a happier life. Those who are unwise will perhaps find some short term rewards, but people will not trust them, they will try to cheat their way to position and wealth, and are likely to have a disastrous life. But not always. Sometimes the evil do seem to prosper. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Proverbs doesn’t address those questions. We must look elsewhere. Rather, Proverbs gives us principles to follow that reflect God’s wisdom, and which will bless our lives, however things happen to go.

Postscript: I’ll mail out the books when I can. I don’t have time to write individual notes, since it’s 12:33 AM on Thursday morning, and I’m trying to get this done, printed, and in the mail. Cindy didn’t have a chance to give me her excellent advice because of her eye problem, but I’m confident she’ll be getting better soon now. (Yesterday was bad.) I do hop to see all of you in Church soon! John